



Study ducks' daily habits for a better bag

By Fish & Game officer Tom Winlove

Early morning as the fog rises, mallards are lifting off from bogs, flooded paddocks, swamps and other wetlands across the region. A quick flight for a few kilometres and their feet are skimming across the water as they land at their safe haven for the day. After a day's relaxing, resting and preening, they take to the air for a few hours before dark, heading off to feed.

Mallards, and most other game birds for that matter, have a fairly consistent routine from day to day, with only slight variations in their timings and the locations they stop at. These routines are generally based around two things: eating and resting.

Learning the types of areas they'll be flying to at different times of the day helps in identifying potential hunting spots and opportunities.

For the first hours of the day, ducks will be leaving their feeding spots to head to their daily hangout. In most cases, these daily habitats will be spots where they feel safe and protected. On warm calm days this will often mean wide open spaces where they can see any approaching danger, while still able to rest comfortably. These qualities are often found in the way of larger ponds, lakes or river beds. On windy, less pleasant days they'll seek more shelter during the day. This still may be on large ponds or lakes but on the downwind side of shelter, such as trees or raupo.

Where rivers are concerned, this may mean underneath overhanging willows. When rivers are flooded, and the weather's rough any sheltered pond just off the river is always a great spot to go to for a morning hunt. Wetlands, where they can get out of the water and rest, are always popular spots. This may be in the way of a walkway to an island, riverbed, a floating log, flattened raupo or the edge of a pond with short grass.

Once done with a day of resting, and with a few hours of light left in the day, mallards will leave their resting places in search of food. Mallards dabble in water for some of

their food which is usually a fixture of different bugs, from caddis flies and water beetles, to midges and even worms. This only makes up about 10% of their diet, the rest coming from plants. They will feed on stubble where they can pick up grain or seed, nibble at low-lying crops like pea, or attack the succulent young roots of grasses both on dry land, or in shallow wetlands. Where newly harvested crops are found, mallards can flock there to feed in their hundreds.

In terms of wetlands, shallow ones with plenty of plant life are where they'll tend to be found – as places where plants are easily nibbled at from the surface. Wetlands that dry up and become covered in grass and weeds that are then flooded provide the best feeding habitat, often attracting hundreds of mallards to feed at one time. This is due to all the floating seed that is released from the plants, as well as an explosion in bug life. After the birds have filled their bellies and the morning sun has risen, they'll make their way back to their daily hangout, completing the 24 hour routine.

Knowing these habitat preferences for the different times of the day, hunters can make better decisions on where to hunt. For maimai or blind hunters, this is about being set up for arriving or passing birds and for jump shooters, being where the birds are already settled. Remember that mallards are social, so even if you're not in a place they've visited before, if the type of place you've picked to hunt satisfies their needs, they'll visit it – if encouraged. This is where your calling and well set out decoy spread comes into play.

It must be remembered that these are only generalisations, as ducks may feed at all times of the day if they need to – and when a rich food source is found in a place where they can feel safe and rest at the same time. Ducks can be found at these spots at any time of the day.

Good hunting!